

STATEMENT ON GLOBAL WARMING

By
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My thanks to Chairman Davis, and the members of the committee, for this opportunity to appear before you as you investigate the vital issue of global warming. My name is Marshall Herskovitz – I’m a producer, writer, and director in Los Angeles, having made such films as “Legends of the Fall”, “Traffic”, and “The Last Samurai”, and I am currently serving as president of the Producers Guild of America. My concern about climate change grows out of a long involvement in environmental issues, but I believe the pressing urgency of global warming transcends those other issues, and I have become worried, as a storyteller, as a communicator, that no clear vision regarding this crisis is being communicated to the American people.

You have heard different opinions today regarding the threat of global warming, but I believe the great majority of climate scientists say the threat is huge and immediate. I believe in fact there is a divide between the scientific world and the political world over this issue, and that our political will does not nearly match what our scientific community is saying. And what they’re saying, frankly – the ones who aren’t factoring political reality into their estimates – is that we have ten to fifteen years in which to cut 80% of carbon emissions in order to avert the worst effects of global warming.

And therein lies a problem, even for many in the environmental movement. The prospect of cutting emissions that deeply, in so short a time, seems fundamentally impossible. It’s not how business works; it’s not how government works. Such precipitous action would decimate our economy and dismantle the American way of life. I think these assumptions are totally incorrect, however, as is another assumption, rarely spoken aloud, that is all the more insidious for the influence it has over how many of us think: the belief that we Americans have grown so spoiled, and are so unwilling to face hardship, that we will sacrifice our children’s future for the sake of our own present comfort.

Which is why I am so grateful to appear before this committee – because I am in the process of starting an organization whose purpose will be to overturn these assumptions, and communicate a greater truth about our national character. America has a historic challenge ahead of it, one that is not only far from impossible, but in fact has a blueprint for success laid down by our own parents and grandparents sixty-five years ago.

In December of 1941, this nation entered a total and unconditional struggle against the Axis powers. Those words – “total” and “unconditional” – are deeply important. From that moment until August of 1945, every single man, woman, and child in the United States devoted him-or-herself to the one goal of defeating our enemies. Every aspect of people’s lives was affected – how they worked, how they drove, how they ate, how they clothed themselves, where they lived – not to mention the millions who were killed or injured in battle. Pertinent to our discussion, let us remember that within three months of Pearl Harbor, every single automobile plant in the United States was shut down and re-tooled for making tanks. Not one automobile was manufactured in the United States between 1942 and 1946, and I’ve never read of anyone objecting. In fact, no price was too great to protect our freedom. I do think many Americans today, three generations of a high standard of living past that time, would have a hard time imagining the efforts expended then.

But let's look at exactly what price was actually paid. When all those automobile plants were being re-tooled, Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors continued to be profitable. The federal government ran up unprecedented deficits in order to pay for the war effort, and ordinary citizens put up with three years of food- and gas-rationing and other privations – but the result was that America emerged from World War II stronger and richer than it had ever been. The effort and commitment necessary to fight global warming do not in any way spell depression or deprivation for our country. Rather – and this is the key point – it is our current lack of action, or our half action, that will inevitably lead to disaster. When much of New York City is inundated, vast stretches of our coastline including half of Florida are gone, when the great farms of the Midwest are barren desert, and half a billion people around the globe displaced, those are the conditions that will precipitate economic catastrophe.

A national commitment – a war – against global warming will cause all sorts of discomforts and discomfitures, but will also stimulate new industries and new parts of the economy. Most of the technology needed to cut those emissions already exists. What we need is the national will, and the willingness of our federal government to take the lead.

Which is why I am starting this organization. That national will does not exist. There is no plan currently before the American people to make the kinds of cuts our scientists are calling for. So this organization will have two agendas. First:

To articulate a comprehensive plan or plans for how America can cut 80% of carbon emissions in ten to fifteen years.

Better policy analysts than I have been working on this problem, and there are all sorts of promising answers: shifting of subsidies and tax incentives for the oil, gas, and automotive industries toward renewable energy and more efficient vehicles; trapping carbon dioxide before it leaves the power companies' smokestacks; retro-fitting existing cars with electric motors so they can switch off during idling; cellulose ethanol; planting 500 million trees in sunbelt cities – the ideas go on and on. What they have in common is that either the federal government must pay for them, or at least indemnify businesses against the enormous financial risks involved. And for the federal government to do that, it needs an unmistakable mandate from the people. Which leads to the organization's second and more important agenda:

To use the tools of modern marketing to put those plans before the American people.

We will create the TV commercials, print ads, websites, editorials, events, daily sound-bites for the news media – whatever is necessary to make people aware, not just of the extent of this emergency, but of the remarkable challenge and opportunity that lies ahead of us.

Millions of Americans are acting now to solve this problem, in their homes, in their businesses, in their local governments. The energy already being expended is remarkable. But we must understand that this crisis cannot be solved from the bottom up. Since I'm a storyteller, I'll postulate a slight adjustment of history: what if the Germans had been planning to invade the United States in 1942? Do you think we could have defeated them with ordinary citizens pulling pistols

from under their beds? Through local grocery stores barring their doors and windows? The only way to defeat the Nazis was through the awesome power of the American industrial machine, through the tens of thousands of tanks and planes and guns, the Liberty ships coming out of dry-docks at the rate of one a week, the millions of people working together for a common purpose, led by a government that was willing to endure deficits of 23% of its GDP in order to make it happen. We defeated the Axis powers in less than four years. We put a man on the moon in seven. We can unleash that awesome power again and solve this problem in ten years, the same way we did it before – by a total, unconditional partnership between government, business, and private citizens.

This is a moment of potential greatness for our nation. We can reframe the divisive political discourse that has characterized our society for years. Global warming is not the province of the Right or the Left; it is a bi-partisan issue, a national security issue, a survival issue. And survival is no single party's territory.

In conclusion, I know there are many, including our president, who believe that global warming is real, but that we don't know if it is caused by human activity. Let's assume for a moment that's correct, or assume it's too late to stop it anyway – and project ourselves thirty years into a future where seas are rising, the mid-west is drying out, and whole populations are on the move. The truth is, for our society and economy to survive under those circumstances, we will have had to make the same changes in energy use we're talking about here. What if a war makes foreign oil unobtainable? What about the enormous task of re-locating millions of people, finding them housing and jobs, feeding them, clothing them? Only by taking fossil fuels out of the equation, by drastically reducing our energy needs, can we imagine coping with such a situation. Imagine for a moment putting your family in the car and fleeing hurricane Katrina. You have half a tank of gas and there is no fuel available anywhere. Would you rather be able to drive a hundred miles on that half tank, or four hundred? That is a perfect microcosm for where our nation might be headed.

We must make these changes now, not in fifty years, if we want to stop this terrible catastrophe from happening; and if we can't stop it from happening, these same changes will be a key to our survival.

Thank you for your consideration, and thank you for holding this hearing.